



New Technologies for the Demystification of Cinema

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Film Quarterly, Vol. 27, No. 1. (Autumn, 1973), pp. 42-51.

Stable URL:

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Film Quarterly is currently published by University of California Press.

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New Technologies for the Demystification of Cinema

For Edison and Dickson, in the earliest developmental stages of the movies, the motion pictures meant a device by which one person at a time, peering into a small hole, could behold the wonders of reconstituted motion: the Kinetoscope. The Lumières and various other eager entrepreneurs saw that, to become big business at that stage of technology, film had to be presented to many people in large halls: so they perfected mechanisms for projection, which ultimately climaxed in theaters that could seat more than 5,000 persons. But since the early thirties the trend has reversed: movie theaters have shrunk to a few hundred seats, and television has established a new paradigm of viewing as a family affair. We are nearing the closing of the circle, when movie viewing will once again be something that one individual does (or at least can do) by himself—though he need no longer peer into the Kinetoscope's recesses, and may soon be able to enjoy his own movie on a wall-sized electronic screen. For the social point of the technology of cassettes and cartridges (and pay-TV) is to enable the viewer to be liberated from the necessity of seeing films only in company with hundreds of other people—which means, of course, seeing only films that those hundreds (or millions) also happen to want to see. The promise of such systems is that, if the cost of buying a copy of a film can approach those of (say) an LP record or a paperback book, the entire market basis will be transformed, and with it the entire idea of "what a film is."

As long as the study of cinema depends upon the substance and systems of motion picture film, we are dependent upon the physicality and idiosyncracies as well as the wonder of what is basically a nineteenth-century technology, virtually unchanged since Lumière lit his first lamp.

Its intrinsic nature, however, imposes mechanical, geographical, temporal, economic, and therefore ultimately political barriers between us and the films we wish to see. The more times we wish to screen the work and the more intensive the level of our analysis, the more difficulties we presently face. Compared to the relative democracy of literature through the paperback, cinema study through film is a limited theocracy.

We are now on the brink of a totally new base of visual technology which has the potential of not only offering viable alternatives to these problems, but of changing, hopefully raising, our collective consciousness of cinema and our personal and public relationships to moving image art. The following is a review of the latest significant systems which are imminent or already open to public access, and the effects and changes we can expect from them. The emphasis here is not on the endorsement of any one patent or another, but as available representations of emerging systems. The point-of-view here will be that of the cineaste, and how these changes can hinder or further that which we now call cinema.

THE CARTRIDGE RESOLUTION

We have become used to hearing enthusiastic predictions about the great impending Cartridge Revolution,* which was supposed to make motion pictures widely available on a new basis, yet not seeing anything much happen. Rumors of further technological gambits may thus be greeted with even greater skepticism than before. Despite all the predictions, the development of cartridge and cassette systems has led

*See "The Cartridge Revolution," *Cinema*, Vol. VI, No. 1.

only to an inconclusive civil war, rather than a revolution: each manufacturer has stuck doggedly to its own individual system, incompatible with the others.

There are several video cartridge systems: Sony U-Matic Color (video cassettes and unit), Avco's Cartrivision (video cartridges) and RCA's Selectavision (prerecorded tapes) and others still in the hot twilight of research and development. Of these, Cartrivision has extended its commitment most fully to the consumer, with a recorder/player and a pilot selection of rental and sale prerecorded ½" tape cartridges. Admiral and Sears dealers handle units with their own deluxe-model color TV in a large console unit integrated with the Cartrivision component. Together with the Instant Replay black and white camera, it goes as a complete videotronic home entertainment center for about \$1,800. Presumably, demonstration models of this system reveal the strengths and weaknesses of the cartridge approach. As the Cartrivision component is not sold separately, you must be willing to take the whole thing. Hispano-Norman Colonial cabinetry and all. I was told that about \$700 of the price covered the color TV, so a separate cartridge player unit could probably be offered for under \$800. The recording



and playback quality of the system using the camera with its 1:3 zoom lens was adequate, resembling that of compact low-cost surveillance cameras. It was certainly acceptable for most home recording situations. I eagerly watched as the demonstration cartridge for rental features was easily clicked into a cavity in the fascia. What followed was: the opening marching sequence from *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, the

landing scene from *Sands of Iwo Jima* wherein John Wayne admits that he, too, is scared, and some harrowing violence from *The Professionals* showing Lee Marvin vs. some Mexican banditos with very short lifespans. As *Cat Ballou* hove into view, I noticed a persistent vertical bounce in the picture. The salesman explained that "these two tension rollers here sometimes get out of adjustment, but can easily be fixed"; he tried, but it didn't seem to help much.

One of the cardinal advantages of these systems is supposed to be the clarity of the direct closed-circuit signal as opposed to the broadcast signal which is vulnerable to interference and scattering. But the tape image seemed actually coarser than and inferior to broadcast programming seen on the same set. And to make a comparison with the highest existing comparable standard, the image was barely one-fourth as good as a broadcast of *Johnny Guitar* I saw on West German TV, with its 1200-line scan (vs. our 525 domestic standard). The German broadcast retained an acceptable level of authenticity of a motion picture, while the Cartrivision did not. Despite the number of times a demo tape may have been run, if "years of trouble-free performance" are to be expected, this shouldn't bring a large drop in quality. Another big disappointment was that the unit cannot freeze-frame. This is a major drawback for the study and enjoyment of both home-generated and prerecorded material.

Still, if the catalogue of Cartrivision's rental features is any measure of the personal choice we can look forward to having through the emerging systems, the future looks bright indeed. Despite the quota of low-interest chaff, there is excellent material to choose from. And choice is the whole point of any alternate distribution technology. *It Happened One Night* and *The Quiet Man* stand out of a crowd of also-rans; there are iconographic westerns such as *Stagecoach*, *High Noon*, *Rio Grande* and *Johnny Guitar*. It is the dramatic films that read almost too good to be true: *Gilda*, *Force of Evil*, *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*, *Mildred Pierce*, and the essential Bogarts: *Casablanca*, *The Big Sleep*, *The Maltese Falcon*, *Dark Passage*, *Key*

Largo and *High Sierra*. Also titles like *Little Caesar*, *White Heat*, *Captain Blood*, *Goldiggers of 1935*, *Macbeth*, and many other American classics. Foreign titles do not seem to present a problem: De Broca's *That Man from Rio*, Chukrai's *The Ballad of a Soldier*, Fellini's *Nights of Cabiria*, Truffaut's *Bed and Board*, Rohmer's *Claire's Knee* and Sjöman's *I Am Curious (Yellow)* promise more to come in world cinema.

But the hitch is that these titles are for rental only—and they cost from \$3.50 for a short feature to \$7.50 for a two-cartridge long feature. After one play and one play only, an interior cam locks into place, and you must return the cartridge. This and the inability to reverse or freeze-frame renders the system of very modest usefulness for cinema study. The argument goes that “You would pay six dollars for two of you to go to the theater to see a movie . . . this way you can see it at home.” Sure, but at that I would rather see the picture in its authentic format and scale. Even with the system's quality limitations, it would sometimes be worth \$6.00 for a cartridge you could *keep*. But otherwise we are still waiting for the right system.

None of the Cartrivision features are available for sale, even the one made up of classic Chaplin footage. There are however, prerecorded titles which you *can* buy, at \$16.00 and \$40.00—especially if you are keen on cooking, sewing and sports. One on Marcel Marceau caught my eye, as well as the intriguing work described as “*Color Music-Opus 4: A kaleidoscope of color vibrates in accompaniment to Mozart's Symphony No. 40 in G Minor.*” Since you can't sample such fare, I think it is asking a bit much to have to take a forty-dollar chance on something which may not be for your eyes only.

The only way presently to get around the rental-only obstacle would seem to be the use of the Cartrivision feature of broadcast recording. Though blank tape cartridges cost about \$38.00 for 100 minutes of running time, you could tape and keep a movie that was shown on TV. There is also a timing relay device in the console whereby you can set the system to turn on,

record and switch off to capture events you don't want to miss (like maybe a President's resignation speech?).

But of course the value of the videotape cartridge systems' competent recording ability to copy broadcast (or cable) programming is in direct relationship to the worth of the material. As we know, (and find a certain righteous chauvinism in), a very significant amount of broadcast material is Movies. But unless you collect TV commercials the way some people collect stamps and coins, taping movies off the air seems an unrewarding prospect. (Can you imagine the proper crackling indignation aroused if an FM station interrupted Beethoven's 9th every few minutes for a word from our sponsor?) Occasionally a full-length feature is shown without cuts or commercials by one of the educational channels, but so far such showings would hardly justify Cartrivision's expense, even if we neglect tape costs.

However, if we really care about visual expression becoming more reciprocal and less passive, then such existing videotape cassette systems offer an interesting completeness. The addition of a simple vidicon camera with microphone enables “home viddies” to be taken in living sync-sound, with the forgiving grace of the tape being recyclable. Compact color cameras are dropping dramatically in cost, though it is still a pretty pricey drama: Akai's new 5¾ lb. CVC-150 lists for \$3,495 (vs. \$250.00 for the Sears 2½ lb. Instant Replay black-and-white camera). Certain disadvantages of this facility at its present stage, however, I find to be rather overpowering. These are *not* portable battery-powered units, and the range of the world viewed is thus limited by the short length of the power-cord umbilicus. Such systems will be useful for documentation of the familial core experience but we do, after all, have interests, experiences, and responsibilities which extend beyond our back yards.

An even more grievous limitation (which applies to all existing video systems) is the lack of editing capability. Not that most home movie-makers seem to be much interested in the magic of re-choreographing time and space anyway,

but even for those that are liberated in that direction, it's going to be a long, long time before a video editing console for the home will descend to the price of an electronic organ or basic Moog synthesizer. Even professional video-tape cannot be simply cut with a scissors like film (doing so upsets the picture); video editing is thus inherently a cumbersome process which involves several expensive playback and re-recording devices. While research is underway that may eventually result in simple and cheap video cutting, present trends are toward quicker but enormously expensive machines. Low-cost video technology in the immediate future will thus push strongly toward single-take, long-scene work. Perhaps I am underestimating the number of native Renoirs, Rohmers and Skolimowskis who can be poets of the long take or meaningful planned sequence shooting with the single-unit home video outfit but at this moment it is Super-8 with its full editing flexibility at low cost which offers the closest approach to Astruc's ideal of the *caméra-stylo*.

Cartrivision thus represented the *première vague* of the new visual technology. But in recent weeks bankruptcy claimed Avco Cartrivision, and hard times certainly face the other competing cartridge systems. There are two major reasons: the lack of international standards, such as were finally developed for film, so that a world market could develop; and cost, which has never been brought low enough to compete with pay television, much less going out to a movie theater.

VIDEO DISCS

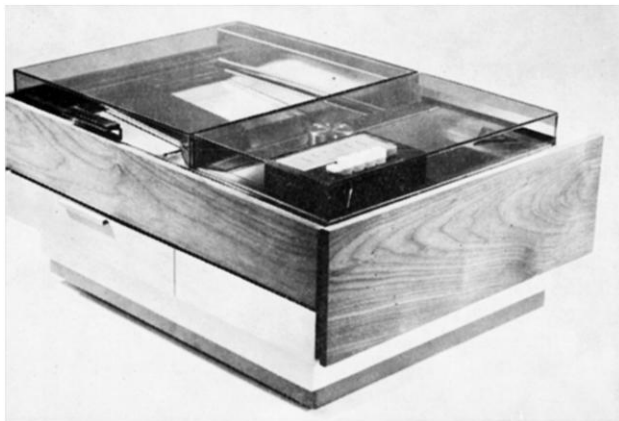
The next, and most ultimately promising stage (it will arrive within a year) is the video *disc*, in which the analogy to the LP record is taken literally. Its form also recalls the Vitaphone soundtrack disc used at the birth of the talkies. Basically a twelve-inch metal-vapor-coated vinyl disc with micro-grooves that carry visual as well as audio information, it has an appealing theoretical simplicity and a low-cost-of-manufacture potential which may prove crucial. Philips, Telefunken, Zenith, Matsushita, RCA and

others are all furiously researching and developing different discs. MCA (which owns Universal Pictures) is thus far the only firm that has come out with information, sufficient to give us here a close look at the great visual wave to come. Their process is called Disco-Vision, and it is very promising indeed.

At present, MCA seems single-mindedly concerned with establishing the potential sales (*not* rental) market for video copies of the vast amount of properties (over 11,000 films) they have title to. As Columbia and RCA did with the early microgroove systems, the Disco-Vision hardware may be marketed at a narrow margin. \$400 is now estimated as the cost of the player units, \$500 for the changers. (They attach to the antenna terminals of any standard TV set, and use its electronics and picture tube.) At that, they would be comparable in price to good hi-fi components and systems, and not beyond the reach of the vast acquisitive middle class, whereas the \$1,800 tag on Cartrivision has stopped almost everybody cold.

The disc system offers features and operational modes which strike immediately at the heart of cinema study needs. Each disc is recorded on one side, with up to forty minutes of playing time: a feature film can thus be contained in a three- to five-disc album. With a changeover time of four seconds, over six hours of unattended playing time can be provided with a full stack of ten discs. Instead of a physical-contact pick-up stylus, Disco-Vision uses an *optical* system; the scanning is done by replaceable helium-neon laser, with a life-expectancy of about 9,000 hours. The disc itself has a transparent optical coating above the focus level, so that dust and scratches do not interfere with the reading of the signal. As if that weren't enough, the discs come in plastic trays, from which the changer automatically extracts the disc, plays it, and returns it to the tray. This means that the disc surface is never touched; and, while it doubtless can't last forever, it is hard to see exactly what could cause it to wear out.

Given this basic structure, the system easily and organically allows for speed-up, slow-down,



The Disco-Vision multiple-disc player-changer. It weighs less than 50 lbs., is 23" x 18" x 11". Total playing time 6 2/3 hours. A single-disc player will also be available.

reverse, frame-by-frame replay, and freeze-frames that can be held indefinitely, as there isn't the rapid image-degradation that occurs on video-tape units. Programming for replaying of selected tracks and digital readout are also possible. One of the more intriguing operational features is the access capability of *radial traversing* of the disc. This means that you can leap forward and backward within the continuity of a movie in searching for that pivotal scene, just as you can manually search for an aria on an opera record, but without the danger of scratching the disc. Paradoxical as it seems, the disc system will give us ways of studying cinema that are literally impossible with motion picture film (or videotape).

MCA bravely promises prices of \$1.99 for a single disc to \$9.95 for a five-disc album: the same range as LP records. Even poor people find the means to own television sets and record players and a good number of records. This means that the disc, unlike the cartridge technology will be essentially non-elitist and reasonably accessible to everyone. With features being sold at those prices, we will face a new and basically political reality: the non-restrictive private ownership of the motion picture as aesthetic artifact. The proposed video-disc system, however it is ultimately formed and implemented, and whomever the piece of the action is secured by, appears to offer the first real means for constructive demystification of the cinema. This demystification will inevitably range from the contempt of familiarity to the

NEW TECHNOLOGIES

knowledge of love, as we find these many-fold paths opening up to personal choice in the manipulation of the moving image.

THE MOLECULAR FRAME

Believe it or not, there are many gifted film critics and theorists who have rarely if ever seen a film other than in projection. It does not follow that every film can be ultimately understood only by a frame-by-bloody-frame microscopy; but with total ease at doing so, many people are going to start playing with movies in this fashion even if critics don't. A gradual rise to a new level of concrete popular understanding of cinema seems inevitable, even aside from the broadening effects of repeated complete viewings of a wide range of outstanding works now seldom seen at all. We will be able to savor the symbolic dissolves of *Dark Passage*, and the woodcut-like compositions of *Gate of Hell*. What's more, we can do so with friends, and go over that dissolve as many times as needed to reveal its metaphysical marrow, or keep a frame on for an hour while admiring Kinugasa's artistry.

The MCA disc has over 35,000 "frames" per side, each one of which can be presented as a clear and steady image, (when the prototype demonstration in Chicago is made commercially operable). Thus Gutenberg as well as Méliès will find a place in video disc. At a page a frame, on one disc you could have all the back issues of *Cahiers*; an essential album for the cinéaste would be highlights from MOMA's Film Stills Archive, and the *L'Avant-Scène du Cinéma* slide sets. In publications, we will be putting our movies where our mouths are, and including discs with film books. Indeed the entire book and clips of the films it discusses could be contained in a couple of discs, programmed to go frame-by-frame for the text, and automatically gear into motion for the moving sequences. We could look forward to booklecturefilms like Arlene Croce on the American Musical, Jay Leyda on Soviet Revolutionary Cinema, Christian Metz on Semiology. As the MCA discs are flexible enough to roll into a tube for mailing, film journalism itself might eventually launch into disc

format, as today many good magazines cost around two dollars anyway. And we film freaks won't be the only ones interested in such material; there will be an inevitable raising of the public consciousness of the forms, range and depth of cinema as the people claim films for their own. Film criticism will have an additional level of practical meaning for the disc-purchasing public.

FILM EDUCATION

At the low cost of discs it will be possible for schools to have large libraries of cinema study material. Students will probably buy their own textdiscs the way they buy textbooks today. But what should not be forgotten is that here, especially, it will continue to be necessary to also project films in their original formats, in the sizes at which they were intended to be seen. For the student to then be able to intensively study a disc of the same title as well as research through the other works of the director, etc., will be an immense advance for cinema studies.

RENAISSANCE OF THE CLASSIC FILM

In the mastering sequence for Disco-Vision, the original material (film, slides, graphics) is fed directly into the mastering machine or through an intermediary video tape. The release discs (manufacturing cost: less than 40¢ each) are replicated from the nickel-plated stamper much the way the LPs are. Most importantly, the mastering is done on a real-time basis. This should mean that films of the silent era can be transferred at their original frame-rate speed (which varied greatly) without most of the problems of film transfers today. There should be no excuse for not securing, as master material for disc release, the best and most authentic print of a title with its original tints and tones, and musical score. According to an MCA news release describing the excerpts contained in the demonstration disc: "...they span the entire historical spectrum of changing film technology, from the old black-and-white nitrate negatives of the 30's to Technicolor's three-strip nitrate negatives . . . culminating in Kodak's acetate color negative of the 70's."

Classic films have suffered greatly in the 16mm release market, often having no more than the kinetic skeleton of their essence remaining in a faded, jerky *Tötentanz*. To avoid similar degradation in disc releasing, I would like to put forth two strong recommendations: (1) that the first frame on the disc be a color-correction pattern enabling you to adjust the color balance of your TV set (what good would the authentic delicate tints of a hand-stenciled 1895 French magic film be, if it were distorted on your tube?) and (2) that MCA, RCA *et al.* take counsel with an advisory group like The Committee on Film and Television Resources and Services, who are dedicated to the furtherance of film art, to develop priority lists of films that are most urgently needed in disc form, and to ensure that the best standards are maintained as to authenticity, completeness, and technical quality of the master materials. There are enough crummy 16mm prints around; we have no need to see them (further degraded) in video-disc form.

MODERN FILM: THE GREAT CORNUCOPIA

Most of MCA's films are American from the 30's on, including the works of W. C. Fields and the Marx Brothers, and titles like: *Double Indemnity*, *The Big Clock*, *Frankenstein*, *Psycho* (with, I hope, the shower scene), *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and "Prize-Winning Student Films." At this point perhaps we can take a hard look at which genres of cinema will be particularly well served by the disc process, and which will not. *Film Noir*, for instance, will be dynamite. These films are among the least expensive and most plentiful titles to acquire, so we should in time have the entire genre for access. Their imagery is probably least hurt by the small screen; I look forward to being able to appreciate at leisure the Goya-esque chiaroscuro of *Raw Deal*, for instance. The American musical, on the other hand, might suffer. Busby Berkeley's compositions were really meant for the big screen, in the biggest houses film has known. Still, they will be better appreciated in another sense because of the slow-speed analytical possibilities of Disco-Vision, where we can see the dynamics of movement which I believe

reveal Berkeley to be an outstanding experimental film-maker.

The television screen basically has a 4:5 ratio with fallen corners. When we start getting into films that use the wide screen, we're really in trouble. As with Cartrivision, and broadcast television, MCA unfortunately intends to fill up that vertical dimension at any aesthetic cost . . . so if we want to see Ray, Sirk, Godard and Lean, it will have to be with their wings clipped. *2001* would be impossible, and even Fuller would be cramped. Unless they can be convinced to retain the horizontal dimension and never mind the black tubing above and below, we are going to have to wait for the legendary wall screen to rescue contemporary features. Solid-state circuits, fiber optics, liquid crystals and all, it's going to be a long wait. There are some projection units operating, but not really practical for widespread home use.

The Cartrivision foreign releases are apparently all dubbed. Hopefully there can be alternate sub-titled and dubbed releases of discs. Failing that, perhaps MCA would consider having all their foreign releases sub-titled; with the two audio tracks available on the discs, one could contain the original language, the other carrying the dubbed track so we could switch to our choice. If the MCA sample album of *Airport* is indicative of the liner notes we can expect, I would like to add another suggestion; there is more than enough room to print the complete credits and production information, plus some basic critical comment which would help the purchaser gain perspective on the film's place in history and the point it represents in the careers of the director, writer, actors and actresses and technicians. Nor should they be any more shy in prominently displaying the release date than is a good vintner.

NEW CINEMA: PRIVATE CINEMA

The entrance cost to the videodisc technology appears to compare favorably with that in the recording industry: under a thousand dollars to have a master cut and enough copies to promote your material. Happily, MCA's posture at present is one of looking forward to extensive li-

censing of mastering facilities rather than maintaining a tight monopoly. This is encouraging. At \$100 to \$200 an hour for a mastering studio, it compares well with videotape mastering. The break-even point for pressings is thought to be from 50 to 100 release discs, after which copies cost pennies. This means that an independent film-maker, for instance, need go no further than his or her original or internegative, and can end up with far more release copies on disc than is possible on film for the same money. It means that the door is open for virtually any material to go out on disc, one way or another.

Of more far-ranging importance is the way that discs can reach the great segmented market in ways film has not. Independent cinema is in far worse shape than it deserves; some of the most interesting and beautiful moving image art is getting very little distribution. It is difficult to assemble audiences sufficient to support it, and television rarely screens it in this country, even in San Francisco. Given the low cost of discs, it should be assured of reaching its present audience through stores, clubs, and even direct-mail, and to reach new but isolated would-be viewers in considerable numbers. More personal and intimate visual expression will be appreciated, and then needed. Many cine-poems like the work of Brakhage and Belson are probably at their best on the small home screen, not in more theatrical projection circumstances. The abstract film has usually been at a disadvantage in an audience, and may well find its rightful home as an object of personal meditation and wonder.

The disc economics would appear such that if you can sell a couple of thousand copies of an independent work, you can at least break even. I would think that it should parallel the classical record industry where many an arcane and obscure work is carried and supported by the big sellers (usually of popular music), with the result that we can look forward to discs of every imaginable visual expression (surely there must be at least a thousand people in North America who would be interested in the structuralist work of Hollis Frampton for two bucks?). Independent film-makers are among the hardest pressed

artists in the world, lucky if the erratic rentals of their works cover even their film stock costs, so they can be *permitted* to continue making films. The kind of distribution promised by the disc—the film as visual paperback—is the first real hope of such film artists.

DISC RECORDING?

There is no intrinsic technological obstacle to the development of home recording sets using discs. There are already units used in scientific and instrumentation fields, usually employing a contact system recording on a re-usable metallic disc, but with relatively short playing times. Panasonic and Hitachi have developed "Freeze-Frame" televisions, using a one-time ten-image capacity magnetic recording disc. When there is a strong enough need, reflected in a demonstrated market potential (which seems to be the name of the game) we'll probably see home units with one-time and re-usable discs, the blank discs costing under two dollars a piece (vs. \$20.00 or so for comparable time in a tape cartridge), something like six years from now. If so, the cartridge systems will lose the recording-ability edge they enjoy at this moment. If not, we will probably see a bilateral visual technology like that in the audio field today: discs for playback release, tape for recording and some playback release.

TOWARDS AN AUDIO-VISUAL HEGEMONY

The MCA disc already has two audio tracks which gives it stereophonic capability, and quadraphonic sound is additionally possible. The recording industry is quite interested in the laser-scan system, because of the durability factor and greater possible quality and range of audio information. We can look forward, therefore, to a unification of TV, hi-fi, and video-disc components in a single system. The audio quality of TV would (or at least *could*) finally be raised to stereophonic high-fidelity, improving the level and range of broadcast material. If the same unit could play back music and video, and also display printed pages, it is hard to see how there would be many homes without the system. Kodak is already marketing a Super-8 film-chain

unit, the Supermatic VP-1, for \$1,195. Like the Disco-Vision player, it displays on a standard TV set. When its price approaches that of a home movie projector, this system will be complete.

There is already talk about the adding of a vision track to future record releases. The first form these visuals take will no doubt resemble concert film footage and what we have seen on the Scopitone Super-8 cartridge juke boxes. If you decide to buy a record of Sonny and Cher's songs, you will jolly well *see* the pair doing their thing, much as on the TV show.

But more exciting and profound possibilities are opened up by this additional audio-visual flood gate. The innovative rock groups will no doubt take the lead (Mick Jagger would know exactly what to do) with dazzling optical trips. The widened opportunity for creative filmmakers for work will find a legion of compatible collaborations, just as many independent films have long used existing music tracks.

The art of abstract vision will be furthered by the work of light-show artists, videographic experimenters, and computer graphics.

A more limited, but no less interesting probability, is the availability of optical-effects generator components to be added to your color TV. With random sequencing, chroma-keying and phasing, etc., it would translate audio signals (such as FM broadcasts) into visual patterns, much as a cybernetic color organ. The more you and I can shape and form our own developing imagery on the screen, the more valuable the new technology will be. At the least, it can remain but mindless electric wallpaper.

EFFECTS ON BROADCASTING AND EXHIBITION

This is an area in which it is perhaps the most difficult to prophesy, save that neither will be the same again. Obviously if the TV set is being used for disc replay, there is no room for broadcast material. This kind of competition is perhaps the best thing that could happen to a medium of promise which has failed to live up to the possibilities sketched boldly by Ernie Kovacs and the G.E. Theater early in television's infancy. There has been some speculation that



MCA's vision of the future home-entertainment center. (The picture is "simulated," i.e. fake)

TV will veer more towards the line now taken by radio: more news and current events, special interest and interview shows. Music has become radio's major material, and movies have been the music of the visi-waves; perhaps some mystic circle will complete itself, and we will see TV programming in the form of previews and samplings of video-disc software for sale, with a new breed of disc-jockey of the silver tube.

It may very well be that cinemas as we know them will phase out. Whether or not the first-run show can keep enough of a lead on the disc release is problematical. Hopefully the art houses will remain, supported by the loyal, discerning audience that loves good film, and would want to see cinema in its authentic form even if they own the disc. There will always be musicals and similar theatrical forms, and the great wide-screen epic which cannot be duplicated on the home set; but just as the circular economics of film production today dictate that most pictures conform to restrictions which will allow them to reap the revenue of broadcasting, so most future features will be tailored for the disc. The exception is the film as environmental work and spectacle. *2001* could be trimmed to 00, and shoe-horned into the tube (over Kubrick's cooling body); but even with a wall screen, it is doubtful that works like *Woodstock* and *Let the Good Times Roll* can be presented adequately anywhere but in a properly prepared

NEW TECHNOLOGIES

theater. In the past few months I have seen some landmarks of cinema's further logical expansion: the Pacific Film Archive's reconstruction of Abel Gance's triptych *Napoleon*, Arthuy's *Polyvision* in Paris, *Laterna Magica* in Prague, and Swoboda's *Noricama* in Nuremberg. These point the way to a completely opened redefinition of cinema as collective theatrical experience which will get added impetus by these other developments.

EROTICA

Cartrivision's catalog lists, under "Adult," titles like *Mona*, *The Nurses*, and *Hollywood Blue*. An inevitable course that discs will furrow will be the erotic and even pornographic work that will help keep us off the streets; it will be the boob-tube in more ways than one. Aside from the wan hope eternal that someone, somewhere, will make the artistically redeeming erotic film, the blue disc should serve as a political litmus test of censorship. When that goes down, you can expect more political interference at other more precious levels.

POLITICS

Within the limits of politically thematic narrative cinema it is immediately encouraging to see titles like *Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion*, *Fail-Safe* and *Dr. Strangelove* included in the initial offerings of Cartrivision. But radical visual expression will have as great a potential for dissemination as more establishment-oriented forms through discs—especially if it evolves into a visual rhetoric that more people will want to look at. As long as radical groups and film-makers are not denied access to disc mastering (which is of course not inconceivable), the only barrier would be the minimal costs towards producing release discs . . . and then the problems of distribution. Of course, in Marxist terms, that financial threshold is in itself a political barrier.

VISUAL SHARING

One of the more quickly overlooked characteristics of the video-disc technology is perhaps one of the most ultimately meaningful. If the

discs indeed are almost impossible to damage or wear out in normal use, their interchange between people and institutions can gradually exert positive influences in structured and unstructured ways, to the benefit of the visual material itself, and our attitude towards it. There should be a great eventual withdrawal of the risk-fear of wear and damage which is a concomitant interface between ourselves and the aesthetic object, when they are films, tapes or records. Many friendships have been strained over indelibly scratched records and chewed-up footage of works borrowed and lent. The discs should impose little of this riding-bicycle-with-glass-sculpture feeling in any degree, but should be an added encouragement to greater visual exchange and the aesthetic dialogue that goes with it. Cinema will become even more a shared art. Institutions, hopefully, will be less uptight about their disc circulation than with the other audio-visual media.

Children. Think upon the ten-year-old named Ingmar Bergman: having been given a toy cinematograph, he wore out the first little film that came with it, saved pocket money to buy what few other titles were available, and even drew

his own cartoons. A deep and lasting fascination and understanding of cinema began there. Too many of us inflict a hands-off policy on our very young to protect our prize LP's, but children should be able to play (yes, *play*) freely with the video-disc unit. They should be able to do so as freely with our album of *Strike*, or *Vertigo*, as with their own favorites of *Big Business* or *Wizard of Oz*; they will probably learn more from that than you and I. The generation that grows up on the crest of this second wave of technology will have a visual consciousness that might well see ours as passive, repressed, and underdeveloped. Their sons and daughters will in turn be part of the inexorably approaching *third* visual wave: three-dimensional holographic imagery viewed at any and every scale. Hopefully, they will still screen the old "flatties" with the love and respect they deserve.

A 17" x 23" chart summarizing the various systems (EVR, Super-8, video-disc, cassette, etc., etc.) is available for \$5.00 from Video-Player Wallchart, Box 1988, Studio City, Calif. 91604.

Reviews

STATE OF SIEGE

Director: Costa-Gavras. Script: Franco Solinas. Photography: Pierre-William Glenn. Music: Mikos Theodorakis.

The new film by Costa-Gavras, which attained pre-release notoriety by virtue of having been hastily withdrawn from the American Film Institute festivities at the JFK Center, does in some measure warrant the panicky response of the cultural custodians in Washington. The film not only presents the execution of an American AID official in a sympathetic light, but goes on first to describe a variety of unsavory American activities in Latin America, including the training of local police forces in methods of torture, and second to indict the United States for its imperialist policies of direct (Santo Domingo) and

indirect (Brazil/Uruguay) intervention in the internal affairs of Latin American nations. Moreover, it exposes the hypocrisy which surrounds the exercise of these policies: the cloak of humanitarian philanthropy provided by American or so-called "international" organizations like AID, IMF, the World Bank, and others; the state ceremonies which customarily embalm the "innocent" victims of "terrorist activity" in a jelly of fulsome praise.

Despite the fact that *State of Siege* is based on an actual incident (the execution of Dan A. Mitrione by the Tupamaros), and evidently adheres in every detail to the events surrounding it, the film is sure to be denounced by American critics as "propaganda," defined for this purpose